

Is The Environment Friendly?

Newcomers to Their First
New England Winter Must Wonder
By the Rev. Canon Robert Merry

It is snowing. It snowed yesterday, 6 inches. It snowed last Thursday. It snowed the preceding Tuesday, this time 7 inches, so much we had to have the driveway plowed. Now piles of snow line our driveway, 4 and 5 feet high.

On Jan. 2 last a gigantic tide flooded the coast including Duxbury; Gurnet Bridge now under construction and demolition and Duxbury Beach were submerged. Many cellars in town had to be pumped out; Powder Point was isolated for 4 hours. Thanks to early warnings and prompt skillful response on the part of Duxbury's town working staff (police, fire, highway, lands) no lives were lost and property loss was kept to a minimum. Duxbury Beach's snow fences and pine posts were all but obliterated. It was a visitation we're not to forget soon.

This is the first age in memory when people are urged to be "kind to our environment," but how kind is this environment to us? It is something to ponder. We are told this high tide was created by the conjunction of the sun and moon and earth in a special way, much as the Rev. Susan Baker said on a recent Sunday at St. John's Church, planets came together in the sky to lead the Wise Men on their journey to the Christ Child. Is this kindness on the part of the environment? Tonight the thermometer is going down near single digit numbers; we recorded 18 below zero one February night in 1934. Is this kindness? This essay seeks to record some instances in my memory bank and before, where the environment rose up in its wrath and pummeled human beings. Sometimes these were the fighting back of nature against man's exploitation like the dust storms of the Midwest or the deforestation of thousands of acres of land in northwest China and other places, now turned into the Gobi Desert. These "natural catastrophes" I list below, however had no relation to man's behavior good or bad; they simply happened.

The first I'll mention was the great storm of 1851 that knocked out Myles Standish's spring, on the edge of the beach opposite Plymouth Beach now marked by a granite plaque. This spring was probably the reason Myles built his first homestead on the bluff above in clear view of the Plymouth settlement as was true of most early homesteads, near a

canopied sleigh down the hill into the great snow drift that always built up between our house and the Lawsons. The Doctor had a Model T Ford (one of the first in town) but never trusted it in a storm like this but hired father and old Bess to drive him. As they hit this drift a 70 mile an hour gust of wind lifted the sleigh and its occupants above the drift, turned it upside down and with old Bess scrambling to get on her feet, my father and Dr. Noyes fought their way through the snow — it was a sorry sight indeed. I rushed up, released Bess from the sleigh, holding her by the bridle and the 2 men righted the sleigh and in less time than it takes to tell, they were on their way again to a call on Powder Point.

Great storms often require human responses that turn the tides of history. One of these was the blizzard of 1888 which my information reports dumped 5 feet of snow in the Boston area and probably takes the prize as the largest single snowstorm in our weather bureau's history. What happened was this: The John Wrights having made a fortune in textiles during the Civil War came to Duxbury from Philadelphia during the mid 1880s. In 1886 Mr. Wright bought the Beach for what we would call today "purposes of development." He planned to build 263 cottages on the beach chiefly for summer residents. The town was so grateful for this as it was hoped this would help Duxbury out of the financial doldrums that had visited them since the end of the great ship-building days. In fact Town Meeting passed a resolution of gratitude for his generosity.

As an assist to this project Mr. Wright set up a "Gurnet Bridge Corporation" in 1887 to build a bridge connecting the Beach to Powder Point and avoiding the necessity of driving around through Marshfield and Green Harbor as we have to do now while the new bridge replacement is under construction. The back to back blizzards of 1888 and 1889 so tore at the dunes on the beach that then stood 50 feet high (I remember them at 35 to 40 feet) that Mr. Wright had to abandon his project. But civic-minded as he was he had made an agreement, so with a third of the cost being paid by the town and a third by the county, he paid the rest and the bridge, begun in 1892 was completed and dedicated with a great town celebration in 1895.

The severest test from the environment the bridge suffered was in the winter of 1918-19. This winter the thermometer went below zero for several days at a time and the Bay was frozen over solid, so much so that my sister Betty recalls driving over to Clark's Island in a horse and sleigh. My most vivid recollection of that winter was the freezing of the water pipes (buried at 5 feet) to our horse barn forcing us to reactivate the stone trough placed beside the flagpole opposite the Cable Office for the horses on hot summer days. The water was of course turned off for the

perhaps as often in these transition times I went back to the horse barn, hitched up a horse and pulled the car home.

I will always be grateful for the Blizzard of '78 because it was the beginning of my feature writing for John and Roberta Cutler and the *Duxbury Clipper*. A few days after the storm my son phoned me and asked, "Dad, you must have had just as bad storms in your day. How did you manage without power equipment, snow plows etc?" I had to think back and I did recall what we did about blizzards and the really significant thing was we didn't have to go out from home for supplies of anykind. We were living in the after period of the independent farm, with animals in the barns and sheds, amply supplied with hay (much of it salt hay from the marshes) and our cellar had potatoes, turnips and carrots and plenty of apples and canned vegetables, and smoked meats hanging in the cellar way. A homestead was just that, a solid base of security for a family and its attendant beasts of burden, its cows for milk, pigs to eat the garbage, and chickens in the shed for eggs. So this was the story I told.

Moving out from these homesteads was what I have called in another connection "The Peddlers' Era" where various "suppliers" drove wagons around to homes with provisions. Today of course we have shopping centers, to which we drive expensive automobiles and the total effect while practically to the same effect depends on an affluent society. I wonder if some Saturday we could computerize the total family cost of visits to the shopping centers; I am sure we would find the cost would be something like a tenth of the system of distribution of food we now use.

It is difficult to pinpoint what we might call the worst winter storm because it would depend on the measures we applied such as quantity of snow, damage from wind and from ice, and disruption of human services. But I am sure a close choice would be one whose date I can't recall but I remember snow fell for 3 days, then a wave of warm air enveloped us with torrential rain and hail and then the thermometer plummeted to near zero. Ice on the snow formed a crust of 3 inches, strong enough to hold a horse. The town was paralyzed and after a couple of days my father hitched up a pair of horses onto a logging bobsled and emptied his entire stock of meat from our basement store and drove the length of Washington St. shouting at the top of his lungs, "meat for sale," and people came out of their houses and looked over the dwindling store of beef and lamb and pork and we chopped "hunks" of meat with the axe we had brought along from the frozen carcasses. I'm not sure that was the storm that we put on our skates and sallied forth to the Village Grammar School. This ice was so bad the town was entirely cut off for a solid week. railroad snowplows could not

the bluff above in clear view of the Plymouth settlement as was true of most early homesteads, near a spring or stream or pond. It is a remarkable fact that this fresh water spring was barely 100 yards from the salt water bay. Directly across the Bay a century or so later, namely in 1951, another storm washed away 150 feet of Plymouth Beach, depositing it half way toward Bug Light, at the end of Brown's Bank.

We all remember the fierce blizzard of '78, 9 years ago (Feb. 7 and 8) that removed almost all the sand from the beach adjoining the Standish spring and placed it at the end of Allen's Lane 100 yards around the corner. This storm showed pictures of a stretch of stalled and buried automobiles 2 or 3 miles long along Rte. 128. MDC and State highway and police officials knew this could happen, but they saw the greater danger in the wind-swept tide that lashed the coast and lifted several houses off their foundations in Scituate and Hull but there were no lives lost because of their courageous decision.

It took the better part of a week for plows and bulldozers to dig the autos and trucks out of the 5-foot drifts, but at least these people could receive help from local police and neighboring houses. I think if I were to report my most vivid recollections of growing up in Duxbury, they would include a major share of snowstorms and high tides and blizzards and the courage and tenacity of people as we struggled to carry on life's responsibilities in the face of such adversity.

I remember so well walking down to the First National store for some groceries for dinner (we lived just above Blue Fish River on Washington St.) in the late afternoon of a fierce blizzard only on my return to see my father driving Dr. Noyes in the doctor's

opposite the Cable Office for the horses on hot summer days. The water was of course turned off for the winter, but could be turned on again by means of a 6-foot steel rod fastened to the pipes down below. These days my brother Henry would get out of bed and before breakfast run down to the watering trough and turn on the water. Meanwhile I would have unhitched the horses from their stalls and guided them down the hill for their morning water. After a few days they would make the trip down and back all by themselves.

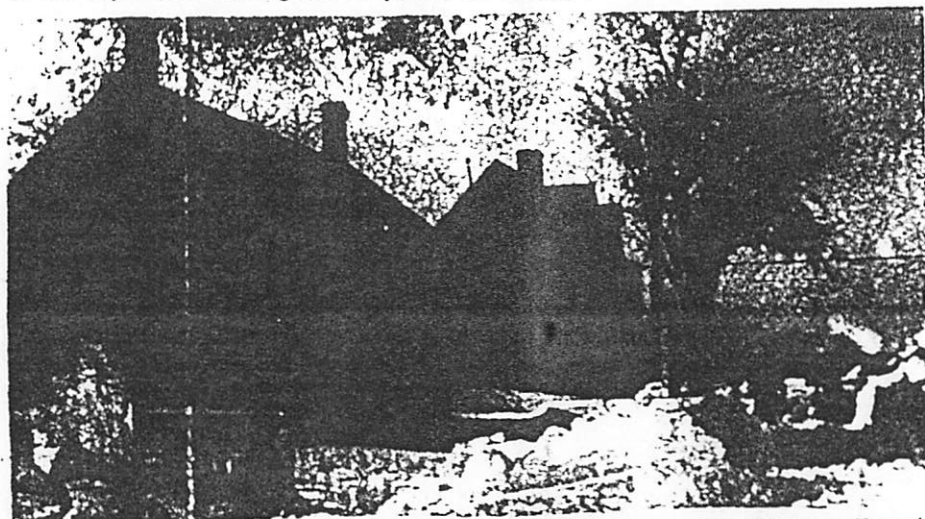
The ice meanwhile had anchored itself so firmly on the bridge pilings in Duxbury Bay that when the tide rose and fell the bridge rose and fell with it and by winter's end it resembled nothing less than a giant wooden corkscrew. This was the last time I was to see a crane beside the bridge as I see now. It took several months to restore the bridge to usable condition. There was also strong sentiment that the bridge was really not necessary and should be abandoned until it was discovered that the cost of demolition would go a long way toward restoration.

The *Boston Globe* printed pictures and told a story about the ice storm that paralyzed all New England for over a week in 1921. I remember that storm well as my father had just purchased his first car, a Model T from T. Waldo Herrick and I was learning to drive it. I coaxed it gently down the hill and over the bridge over Blue Fish River and around St. George St. but the crowned road with the center of the road several inches higher than the gutters to assist water run-off was too much for me and the car simply straddled the highway at a point somewhere opposite what is now Holy Family Church and refused to go any further like a stubborn mule. I don't recall what I did then,

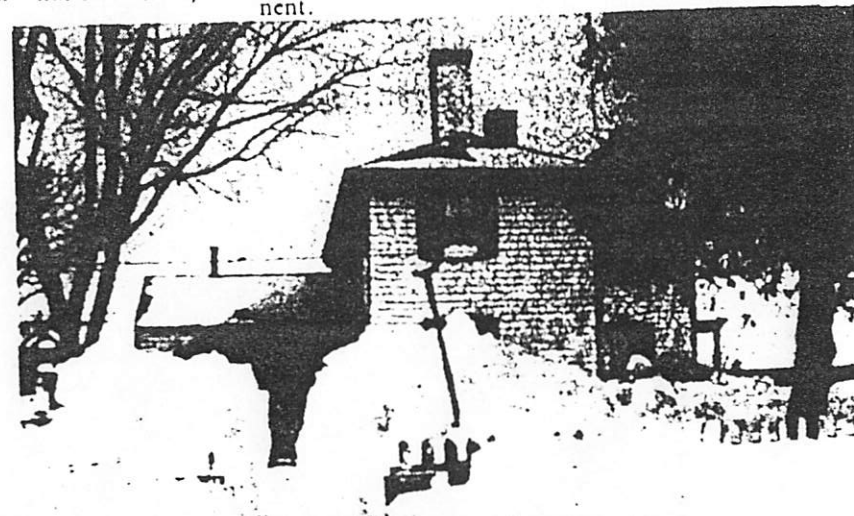
School. This ice was so bad the town was entirely cut off for a solid week, railroad snowplows could not dig the snow off the tracks because the packed ice on the rails would derail the plow. Finally after a week a warm sun came out and I remember the plow coming through Island Creek with 2 locomotives pushing it on ahead. We were delivering meat at a residence above the tracks and I remember rushing down the bank of snow behind the house, apron flapping around my knees to see this enormous display of power as the engines flung great cakes of ice 6 or 8 feet long into the air on their way to the railroad junction in Kingston.

As I draw this essay to a close another blizzard has come and gone with winds up to 70 miles an hour leaving huge drifts on the highways all over town. Plows and sanders have come and gone and Don Beers has fought his way into and out of our driveway, and the thermometer sits at 18 degrees above zero.

It has been a severe winter, even if few records have been broken. But the experience of a New England winter especially for newcomers does raise the question of the appropriateness of the environment for the use and even comfort of human beings. On the whole we have to believe that in the long run, the environment is indeed kind, as it does foster life for us. The sun climbs a few inches higher each day, and soon the sap will be returning to the maple trees and leaves will appear and the grass will become green again. We believe these omens and look for them to appear, even as Bruce Schwoegler our local TV meteorologist does say that New England is the garbage dump of the weather of the American continent.



Surplus St. residents shovel snow. On left is former home of the William Facys', now the home of the Charles Rogersons'. Next is the Bartlett house, ancestors of Mrs. Thomas Lawson and today the home of Mr. and Mrs. Henry Stout. This house was once a Capé.



On Washington St. across from Surplus St., this was the home of 7 generations of Cushings. For many years it was the summer home of the Herbert Kelleys and now is the home of the Kelley's daughter, Louise and her husband Nathaniel Rochester.